“Mnemonic imperatives” (MIs) are imperatives of the form (Don’t) remember to x! or (Don’t) forget to x! I show that MIs are puzzling from the perspective of existing semantic accounts of imperatives. This puzzle is resolved by introducing notions of awareness and unawareness into a model for pragmatic reasoning. This resolution to the puzzle of MIs introduces a second puzzle, which can be solved via a version of the principle Maximize Presupposition (MP).

I illustrate the puzzle of MIs with a To-Do List semantics for imperatives ([Por04, Por07]). If A is a set of agents and A is a set of actions, then T : A → ϕ(A) is a To-Do List mapping agents to the actions to which they are committed. Consider (1) and (2) below:

(1) A: (to B at 9 A.M.) Email me the report by the end of the day!

(2) A: (to B at 11 A.M.) Remember to email me the report by the end of the day!

A’s utterance in (1) adds to T(B) the action of emailing A the report, while A’s utterance in (2) adds to T(B) the action of remembering to email A the report. However, (2) presupposes both that B is committed to emailing A the report and that remembering to email A the report is a necessary condition for B to email A the report [BF15, Nad15]. If both of these presuppositions are satisfied, then B is committed to remembering to email A the report before A utters the imperative in (2). Because of this pre-existing commitment, A’s utterance in (2) should have no effect on B’s commitments. What, then, is its purpose?

I resolve this puzzle via a modified version of the awareness model presented in [FdJ11]. Let A : A → ϕ(A) be a function mapping agents to the actions of which they are unaware. Unawareness of an action a on the part of an agent α precludes α from perforning a. Importantly, α may be unaware of an action on α’s TDL (i.e. possibly T(α) ∩ A(α) ≠ ∅). If α is part of a discourse in which some action a is mentioned in utterance u and a ∈ A(α), then u makes α aware of a. Formally, A(α) is updated such that A(α) + u = A(α) ∩ (A\a).

Note that an utterance u may make an agent aware of an action a in virtue of u’s at-issue or not-at-issue content dealing with a. Therefore, a cooperative speaker may utter a MI if she suspects that this MI will make an addressee aware of some action on his TDL.

Since both MIs and non-MIs may make an addressee aware of an action, we incorrectly predict that in the situation described above, A may repeat (1) at 11 A.M. with the same effect as uttering (2). In fact, doing so would make B aware of the relevant action, but is either more heavy-handed than (2) or suggests that B did not hear A in (1):

(3) ? A: (to B at 11 A.M.) Email me the report by the end of the day!

To rule out (3), we use a version of the principle MP, which requires that among alternative expressions, that with the strongest presuppositions is preferred. Since (2) is presuppositionally stronger than (3), it is preferred. Relevant alternatives for MP are usually expressions that have the same asserted content relative to the context, but here we assume alternatives are those that would have the same effect on the addressee’s awareness state.

References


